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## THE COMPARATIVE STUDY OF WORDS IN FOREIGN LANGUAGES

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The study of a foreign language deals first and last with words. Only through them is there access to the thoughts, so that even the study of literature depends also on the understanding of the words in which literature is dressed. It would be a hopeless task to learn a foreign language, if the foreign words were distinct and separate from each other. The memory could not retain the knowledge of so many unrelated facts. But no such condition exists. Words of the same language are related to each other and to others in other languages. The lines of association cross in all directions, forming a network of connections. Consciousness runs along these lines of connection from one thought to another, using them as bridges from the old to the new ideas. The comparative study of words investigates these interrelationships, with a view to discovering the lines of association between the numberless phenomena of language. It is simply following the instinct of analogy. It is instinctive to note resemblances in objects and to group them together by classes according to their common properties. The same habit prevails, consciously or unconsciously, in the study of foreign words. The faculty of learning a foreign language depends mainly on the ability to see resemblances, and thus to classify readily the new and strange materials. Classified knowledge is easy to remember, and so persons with this ability learn languages easily. Fortunately, everyone possesses this ability in some degree and can develop it by practice. It seems to me self-evident that we should take advantage of this native ability in learning or in teaching foreign languages, and should develop it along the lines pointed out by experience. These lines have been investigated by comparative philologists, and the phenomena which they have observed can be used to good advantage, without any profound knowledge of philology. Philology is too

deep a science for the immature student to understand. Yet some of its principles are comprehensible to him and can be applied by him to his great benefit.

Of prime importance in the study of any Indo-European language are some simple principles with reference to the relationship of the forms of cognate words. The help which even the elementary knowledge of these principles gives, points them out as manifestly one line of relation which the student should be trained to observe. These cognate words bear on their faces the marks of identification. It is only necessary to learn how to recognize the marks, in order to relieve the memory of the burden of remembering the words separately. The principle of cognates is especially applicable to two languages so closely related as English and German. It applies to hundreds of important words, many of which are almost identical in both languages. But in most cases the similarity is not just on the surface and requires the intermediate steps of consonant changes to recognize. But the leading principles of these changes are not many, and facility in applying them is so helpful that it is worth the time and effort required to gain it. More time is required to learn how to apply the principles, for practice is harder than precept. But the habit, once formed, helps to remember a multitude of words, which are recognized as simply variants of familiar English ones. It is applicable to a hundred or to a thousand cases. The amount of time required at first to master the principles grows relatively less, in proportion as the number of cases increases to which it applies, until the time may be practically disregarded.

I have been interested to note by actual count what proportion of German words have English cognates, and the result confirms me in my high regard for this principle. The experiment was with one of Grimm's *Märchen*, chosen for the sake of its familiarity—the well-known tale of “Dornröschen.” The nouns and verbs were considered as being the principal elements of the sentence. Of the different nouns, 65 have English cognates in present use, while only 25 have not; among the verbs, 61 have English cognates and 23 have not; so that the proportion of English cognates to non-cognates is almost 3 to 1, and more than two-thirds of the key-words of the selection have cognate forms in English. Of a list of 270 German

nouns of most frequent occurrence, given in Bierwirth's *Grammar*, almost 200 have cognates in common use, confirming the result of the other experiment. The majority of the cognates in "Dornröschen" give also the meaning of the foreign words. Of the nouns, for example, are: *König, Bade, Tochter, Tod, Fest, Ding, Dorn, Koch*, etc.; of the verbs, *war, sass, bringen, essen, grüssen, stechen, gebär*, etc. But there are a few whose cognates are not equivalents. As they illustrate an objection to the study of cognates—namely, that the cognate is often misleading, because it does not give the equivalent meaning—the list of them is given; *Zeit, Schloss, Pferd, Hund, Dach, Blatt, Kopf, Lust, Stube, Fahne* (ten nouns); *wissen, bleiben, beschenken, rächen, verlassen, bewahren, empfinden, dringen, abraten, rupfen* (ten verbs). The fewness of these examples as compared with the whole number of cognates is the first fact that impresses one, less than one-sixth of the whole number lacking a complete equivalent. This is not large enough a proportion to affect the principle of cognates. But even these few are not positively injurious, for they have points of interest to attract the attention. They may be divided into two classes. The first class embraces those whose cognate form is archaic, or special, but yet is clearly suggestive of the correct meaning. Into this class fall the most of these words; namely, *Zeit, Schloss, Pferd, Hund, Dach, Blatt, Lust* (seven); and *wissen, rächen, bewahren, empfinden, dringen, rupfen* (six). These words illustrate the changing of the language. Words are not fixed, but shift their meaning, gain and lose currency, broaden or limit their significance, and are displaced in one community, while remaining in good use in another. The words of the first class show a shifting of meaning, but without entirely changing the significance. The shifting one way or another gives just the flavor of interest necessary to fix the word in mind.

*Zeit* is the equivalent of our archaic word, found only in compounds like "Christmastide," "noontide;" *Schloss*, of our "slot," formerly meaning "bolt" or "bar." From its first meaning, implying strength and security, the German has widened its application so as to include "castle," a strong and secure building. *Pferd* is a "palfrey," an extra horse, a riding animal by the side of a war steed, called *Röss*. *Wissen* is equivalent to our verb "wist" or "wot,"

now limited to conservative legal forms and biblical speech. And thus, interesting points might be given in regard to all of these words.

The second class is composed of those words whose English cognates signify something quite different from the German words. This class is small and consists, in the passage considered, of the following: *Kopf*, *Stube*, *Fahne*, and *bleiben*, *beschenken*, *verlassen*, *abrat**en*. These differ only in degree from those of the first class. The shifting of the meaning has been carried farther with them, so that the similarity or suggestiveness of meaning is not striking. It is necessary to delve deeper into the study of language in order to find the bond connecting the German words with their English equivalents. Yet the connection is not remote, after all, with some of them. *Kopf* ("head") and "cup" are similar as regards shape; *Stube* ("warm room") is close to "stove" considered as the source of the warmth; *Fahne* ("banner" or "standard") is similar in appearance to a weather "vane;" *beschenken* is a reminder of the old contrivance used in drawing off liquids from barrels, the idea of giving being developed from the custom of giving to others to drink.

So other words chosen at random, such as *bekommen*, *klein*, *Teich*, *gern*, *gelten*, and *krank*, are more or less closely connected in thought with their English equivalents, and the gap is not too wide to be bridged in thought. They may be taken as texts for little digressions into the history of speech and social customs. These excursions resemble the field trips of the botanist and geologist. Here and there is gathered a specimen illustrative of the processes of language, and enforcing truths of rare interest and value, although gathered by the way. This indirect study is practical for itself and for its effect in brightening up the interest in the routine work. One of Lowell's habits was in accord with what is here suggested. In his biography, Scudder speaks of Lowell's habit of noting down odd words that he met in his reading and of his delight in tracing their derivation. "A word," he said, "whether in Old French, English, or Yankee, was at once a lively interest and an article in a museum. He never tired of pursuing the ancestry or the kin or the progeny of these winged creatures." Any discipline or method suited to develop such a habit as this of Lowell's among students is certainly worthy of recommendation. If it had no other value than of leading to a

better acquaintance with the form and contents of words, it would be worth all it costs as a means of culture.

Another strong bond of association which applies to multitudes of words is offered by the processes of derivation and composition. Words can be classified according to their stems or other component parts. A knowledge of some of the simple principles of derivation and composition lies right on the surface of words. The familiar noun suffixes in German, *-chen*, *-lein*, *-heit*, *-keit*, *-ung*, *-in*, *-er*, *-schaft*, and the adjective suffixes, *-los*, *-haft*, *-ig*, *-lich*, the common separable and inseparable verb prefixes, and the direct derivatives from verbs, occur on every page and thrust themselves into notice. A careful study of them leads to the habit of building up stem-groups. Word after word associates itself with the one stem, until a group of a dozen or two dozen is formed and easily held in mind. In this way the whole stock of words in a given language can be classified, thousands of words falling into a relatively small number of groups. The comparative study of component elements in German words will help to recognize, in the story of "*Dornröschen*," such words as *Königin*, *Mädchen*, *Schönheit*, *Reichtum*, *Spruch*, *ansehen*, *aufheben*, *freundlich*, *verständlich*, *verrostet*, *Schlüssel*, and *Spindel*. In case these derived or compound words are cognate with English words, the associations by the cognate and by the common stem reinforce one another and form a double bond for the word. So much the better. In practice it results that the groups in which the words are classified by the one or the other principle are not wholly separate, but overlap one another. The points of overlapping only strengthen the impression and are so much the more securely held in mind. It may be illustrated by the index of a book. The subject treated many times in different connections has many cross-references, and is brought in that way all the more prominently before the mind. These different associations of words are like cross-references and help to locate the word all the more quickly.

The study of derivation and composition leads to the fundamental processes of language-building. It shows how words are formed and grow, mostly by unconscious processes, according to the spirit of the times. The great languages of ancient and modern times are shown to be essentially akin; to differ in form, but not in

spirit. In Latin the key to many words is contained in the familiar prefixes, *ex-*, *e-*, *ad-*, *con-*, *anti-*, *inter-*, etc., almost all of them being attached to certain verbs. For example: *duco*, *educo*, *adduco*, *conduco*, *introduco*, *deduco*; and *rumpo*, *erumpo*, *corrumpo*, *interrumpo*, etc. The composition of words is not always as apparent as in these cases, but there are degrees of association. Combinations are formed at first loosely and become more closely welded by current usage, until they are frequently no longer recognized as compounds. "NostriL," "sympathy," "biscuit," "rendezvous," "kirmes," and *Kehraus* are examples. The composite appearance is reduced to the minimum in "fret," "aware," "doff" and "don," *Glück*, etc. A notable example of derivatives is the group centering about the word *Specio*. Skeat's *Dictionary* gives thirty-one derivatives in English, all in common use, including such words as "aspect," "prospect," "expect," "expectation," "conspicuous," "perspective," "respect," "respectable," "species," "special," "specimen," etc. From the Greek word *σκέπτομαι*, from the same root, come "skeptical," "scope," "bishop," and "episcopal;" and from the Teutonic root we have "spy."

The study of French and of any of the other Romance tongues is greatly facilitated by reference to the Latin sources. It is not necessary to go into the philological principles deeply in order to see the close relation between the original and the derived languages. Without any knowledge of the special laws of the change from Latin to French, anyone can see the close relationship of *arbre*, *homme*, *filie*, *livre*, *fleur*, *main*, *tête*, *école*, *plume*, *grand*, *bon*, *nouveau*, *écrire*, *prendre*, *venir*, *donner*, *dire*, *parler*, and scores of others, to the Latin originals. The advantage of comparison in such cases is too obvious to need recommendation. Besides aiding the memory, it reflects light on the languages brought into comparison. The habit of comparing the words in the different foreign languages has the added advantage of deepening the impression of all of these on the mind, as they are recalled then more often and each time leave the impression deeper. A better acquaintance with the real significance is also gained at the same time, as one views it in comparison with similar forms.

The French language does not lend itself so aptly to the study of

composition, showing its analytical nature in contrast with the synthetic nature of highly inflected languages like German, Latin, and Greek. Still it falls into small groups of related words, such as: *venir, devenir, revenir, convenir, prévenir, convenir, convenance; écrire, écrivain, écriture, écriteau, écritoire; diriger, directeur, direction, directoire*, etc. The study of word-groups in Greek is practically essential, according to the statement of Professor John Williams White, that "the ratio, in classical Greek literature, of the derived and compounded words to the root-words is at least ten to one. . . . It means that one reading through classical Greek literature, from Homer to Aristotle, would find that ten words in eleven on the average are filially related to some other word, and that all were akin."

Thus far only the comparison of the forms of words has been considered. But another very profitable line of comparison is directed to the significance of the words. The meaning of words often yields a very apt bond of association. A glance at the real, etymological meaning will often show the word in a new light. The spark of interest is kindled which photographs the word on the sensitive plate of the mind. Such study is fascinating, and its results are valuable in many ways. Obviously, it leads first to a better understanding of the words. The word "indorse" is plain in the light of its etymology, but is usually only half understood by people who are told to "indorse a note," as is shown by the frequent question whether they are "to indorse it on the back."

The German language lends itself especially well to this analysis of words, for it displays its pictorial quality in the large number of compounds, spontaneously fitted to the new ideas. It depends on its own resources to supply expressions which other languages simply borrow. It is picturesque in its combinations of familiar words to express new ideas. *Fingerhut, Handschuh, Fernsprecher, Bleistift, Eisenbahn, Gasthaus, Gottesacker, Baumwolle, Küchenzettel, Glockenstube*, are instances of this fertility of the German language. In scores of cases it forms a phrase from its own native stock, where the English simply borrows a Latin or French expression. When our word is derived from the Latin or Greek, we appreciate its meaning more thoroughly by comparing it with the German equivalent. Such expressions as *durchsichtig* ("transparent"), *Vorsicht* ("providence"),



*Aussicht* ("prospect"), *entwickeln* ("develop"), *Einfluss* ("influence"), *überflüssig* ("superfluous"), *Mitleid* ("sympathy" or "compassion"), *Handschrift* ("manuscript"), *vorziehen* ("prefer"), help us to understand our words better by calling our attention to their real meaning. They show the real character of words as pictures, merely the outward symbol of the mental view. The comparison of these pictorial symbols shows in many cases that the view-point is different with different nations. One nation seizes on one quality, which it represents in its picture, and another nation seizes on another quality. English "bicycle" and German *Fahrrad*, "overcoat" and *Winterrock*, "knife" (a utensil for nipping) and *Messer* (a meat-knife, probably of stone), "teach" (to show) and *lehren* (to cause to learn), "read" (to interpret the runes) and *lesen* (to gather up the sticks on-which are the runes), "plain" (simple), and *schlicht* (derived from *schlecht*), show the different view-points of the two languages. The investigation of the real significance leads to the basis of language, to the genius of the language. For what is the genius of a language but its peculiar spirit, its way of looking at things? Compare the French *cloche* and *pendule* with English "clock"; *garçon* with "boy," "waiter," "bachelor;" *hôtel* with English "hotel;" *jaux-col* with "collar;" *épicerie* with "grocery." Old English and the primitive languages were probably more pictorial than modern tongues, to judge by their compounds, such as *middan-geard* ("middle garden," for earth), *heahfæder*, *mæsse-preost*, etc.

Insight into the real meaning of words conveys many hints of the cultural history of the people. When the Latins used *hostis* ("enemy") to describe one who is, with the Teutonic nations, a *Gast* or "guest," their notion regarding strangers is clearly illustrated. English "lord" (*hlaf-weard*, "loaf-keeper") suggests the bread-winner. German *Buchstabe* is a souvenir of the beginning of writing, when beech sticks had rough characters scratched on them and were used for divination. English "to write" (*ritzen*) commemorates the process of scratching the runes, "read" (*raten*), their enigmatical significance, which only a priest could understand, and German *lesen*, the act of gathering the sticks, preparatory to reading them. English "digit" commemorates the use, in primitive times, of fingers and toes in counting. "Fee" (Latin *pecus*, "cattle") points back to the

time when property consisted of cattle, and "salary," to the payment of money to the Roman soldiers for salt. So the words relating to religion, church, home, school, and social life in general give many glimpses into the social conditions of the early times. The German names for school objects, such as *Schule*, *Schüler*, *Student*, *Tinte*, *Papier*, *schreiben*, *Lektion*, *Universität*, point to the introduction of schools from Italy and to the prevalence of Latin in the Middle Ages. Compare the names of animals. Those which are known to the Germanic tribes have cognate names, such as "bear," "wolf," "fox," among wild animals, and "ox," "cow," "horse," "sheep," "swine," "dog," and "cat," among domesticated ones.

These considerations convince me of the value of the comparative study of words. It is a practical aid to the memory in learning a foreign language. But it touches still higher planes. It is essential in the study of literature; for literature depends on words. No one can perceive the fine distinctions of thought and rise to the understanding of literature, except by fully appreciating the meaning of the separate words. Every aid to such appreciation is of direct benefit to the supposedly higher study of the ideas which the words symbolize. They are the only avenue to the thought preserved in the noble works of literature. They are the medium of that culture which is derived from the contemplation of sublime ideas. We cannot investigate words without penetrating to the mind regulating the language. A broad survey of language and of its phenomena includes the view also of the inner life, the soul-life, of the people. What method leads more directly to the acquisition of the *Sprachgefühl* than this comparative method, which reveals the phenomena peculiar to the genius of the people? Language, in this view, becomes more than an assembly of dead symbols; it is a living organism, shaped by all the influences that converge on the intellectual life of the people; an essential part of man's own being. The study of this organism is as broad as the study of man. It is philology in the sense of Wilhelm von Humboldt, which is broader in its scope than psychology or history, and embraces the consideration of all the circumstances contributing to the development of mankind.